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# POSITIVISM: ITS POSITION, AIMS AND IDEALS.

BY FREDERIC HARRISON.

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POSITIVISM is at once a philosophy, a polity, and a religion—all three harmonized by the idea of a supreme Humanity, all three concentrated on the good and progress of Humanity. This combination of man's whole thought, general activity, and profound feeling in one dominant Synthesis is the strength of Positivism, and at the same time an impediment to its rapid growth. The very nature of the Positivist scheme excludes the idea of wholesale conversion to its system, or of any sudden increase of its adherents. No philosophy before, no polity, no religion was ever so weighted and conditioned. Each stood alone on its special merit. Positivism only has sought to blend into coherent unity the three great forces of human life.

In the whole history of the human mind, no philosophy ever came bound up with a complete scheme of social organization, and also with a complete scheme of religious observance. Again, the history of religion presents no instance of a faith which was bound up with a vast scientific education, and also with a set of social institutions and political principles. Hitherto, all philosophies have been content to address man's reason and to deal with his knowledge, leaving politics, morality, industry, war, and worship open questions for other powers to decide. So, too, every religion has appealed directly to the emotions or the imagination, but has stood sublimely above terrestrial things and the passing cares of men. A mere philosophical idea, like Evolution, can sweep across the trained world in a generation, and is accepted by the masses when men of learning are agreed. A practical movement, such as Reform, Self-government, Socialism, or Empire, catches hold of thousands by offering immediate material profit. Men of any creed, of any opinion, can join in the definite point.

This has given vogue to so many systems of thought, so many political nostrums, such a variety of religious revivals. It has also been the cause of their ultimate failure, however great their temporary success. They have been one-sided, partial, mutually destructive. A religion which ignores science finds itself at last undermined and discredited by facts. A polity which has no root in history and in the science of human nature, ends in confusion, like the Social Contract or the Rights of Man. And a philosophy which is too lofty to teach men how to live, or what to worship, is flung aside by the passions, emotions, interests of busy men.

Positivism insists that the cause of all these failures has been the attempt to treat human nature in sections and by special movements, whereas human nature is an organic whole and can only be treated as an organism of infinite cohesion. Positivism is the first attempt to appeal to human nature *synthetically*—that is, to regard man as equally a logical being, a practical being, and a religious being, so that his thought, his energy, his devotion may all coincide in the same object. The Christian preacher may cry aloud that this object is God and Salvation. But when he is asked to explain the relation of Salvation to Conic Sections or to Home Rule, his answers are vague. The Agnostic philosopher, again, assures us that this centre of thought is Evolution; but how the devout soul is to worship Evolution, or how the workman is to better his lot by Evolution, are problems which the Agnostic philosopher finds troublesome and idle. The Radical Reformer insists on a brand-new set of institutions, and trusts that men's beliefs, habits, desires, yearnings and religions will soon settle themselves. But this is the last thing they ever do. Hitherto all philosophies, all polities, all religions have sought to treat human nature as a quack who should treat a sick man, on the assumption that he had no brain, or that his nerves were of steel, or that his stomach was to be ignored. They have had successes, as nostrums do have. The Positive Synthesis, for the first time, provides the harmony for thought, activity and feeling. But, since almost the whole of our real knowledge is limited to this planet, and certainly the whole of what we can do is so limited, and since our best aspirations and ideals are human (or, at least, anthropomorphic), it follows that any true Synthesis of human nature as a whole must centre in Humanity. That is the key to the power of Positivism, and also to its very gradual advance.

That which is nothing unless it be comprehensive, systematic, synthetic, naturally finds arrayed against it the popular currents of the hour. There never was an age so deeply intoxicated with specialism in all its forms as our own, so loftily abhorrent of anything systematic, so alien to *synthesis*, that is, organic coördination of related factors. Everything nowadays is treated in infinitesimal subdivisions. Each biologist sticks to his own microbe; each historian to his own "period"; the practical man leaves "ideas" to the doctrinaire, and the divine leaves it to the dead worldling to bury his dead in his own fashion. Specialism is erected into a philosophy, a creed, a moral duty, an intellectual antiseptic. It is this dispersive habit which makes our art so mechanical, our religion so superficial, our philosophy so unstable, and our politics so chaotic. A movement, of which the first aim is to stem the torrent of this dispersiveness, naturally finds welcome only with those whom our moral, material and mental anarchy has profoundly saddened and alarmed.

Positivism, then, so far as it is a religion, does not seek to be accepted on impulse, or by rapture, under a gush of devotional excitement. When Peter preached, "Repent and be baptized, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost!" the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. But Saint Peter cared little for science or philosophy, and even less for politics and art. Positivism asks to be accepted as the result of a great body of convergent convictions, or not to be accepted at all. Being a religion, it is not a thing to be decided by the authority of the learned. Every brain must reason it out for itself; every heart must feel its enthusiasm; every character must resolve to live and die by it in daily life. It is not like a political movement which aims at forming a party, a militant league, or a revolution. It never appeals to the instinct of combat; it inflames no passion of self-interest; it panders not to the spirit of destruction, to the spirit of equality, or the love of mockery and satire. It offers nothing immediate, no panacea to make every one blissful, or rich, or wise. It insists that all reforms must be gradual, complicated, spiritual and moral, not material and legislative. It discourages all immediate and direct remedies for social and political maladies, and ever preaches the humble and difficult method of progress by mental education and moral regeneration. Now, those reformers who are ready to sacrifice all their impatient

hopes, all royal roads to the millennium, all revolutionary dreams for establishing Utopia, such spirits are few and rare.

The problem before Positivism is threefold; each side being practically equal in importance and also in difficulty. It seeks to transfer religion from a supernatural to a scientific basis, from a theological to a human creed; to substitute in philosophy a relative anthropo-centric synthesis for an absolute, cosmical analysis; to subordinate politics, both national and international, to morality and religion. No doubt, in these three tasks the religion is the dominant element. The change in its meaning and scope is the most crucial in the history of human civilization. The change involves two aspects, at first sight incompatible and even contradictory. The one involves the surrender of the supernatural and theological mode of thought; the other is the revival, or rather the amplification, of the religious tone of mind.

Positivism, thus, with one hand, has to carry to its furthest limits that abandonment of the supernatural and theological field which marks the last hundred years of modern thought, and yet, with the other hand, it has to stem the tide of materialism and anti-religious passion, and to assert for religion a far larger part than it ever had, even in the ages of theocracy and sacerdotalism. The vulgar taunt that Positivism is anti-religious arises from ignorance. The constant complaint of Positivism is that religion, in all its Neo-Christian phases, has shrunk into a barren formula. The essence of Positivism is to make religion permeate every human action, thought and emotion. And the idea of humanity alone can do this. Deity cannot say, "*Nihil humani a me alienum.*" Humanity can and does say this; whereas, in logic, the formula of theology—the formula in which it glories—is "*Omne humanum a me alienum.*" Omnipotence, as such, can have no concern with the Binomial Theorem, or a comedy of Molière, or female suffrage, or old-age pensions, or a Wagner opera—that is, with ninety-nine parts of human life and interest. The result is that theological religion has less and less to do with human life. If religion is ever to be supreme, it must be anthropo-centric.

But, on the other hand, an age, so ardently materialist and scientific as our own, is antipathetic to the idea of religion presuming to interfere at all. The ordinary agnostic or sceptic, if he abstains in public from Voltairean mockery, systematically treats religion, even the religious tendency or tone of mind, as an

amiable weakness and negligible quantity. He is little concerned to attack it, for he finds it every day more willing to get out of his way, and to wrap itself up in transcendental generalities. This is the temper which Positivism has to subdue. But it finds the scientific and positive minds scandalized at the suggestion of any revival of religion, whilst the religious world is scandalized by the repudiation of theology. A movement, having aims apparently so little reconcilable, can only find prepared minds here and there to accept it. Yet its strength lies in this: it is the only possible reconciliation of two indestructible tendencies, equally deep-rooted in the human mind—the craving for the assurance of demonstrable realities, and the craving for faith and devotion as the supreme control of human life.

This summary sketch of the Positivist Synthesis of Thought, Feeling and Life is not intended as any explanation of it—an elaborate volume could not give room for that—but as a mere preliminary to dealing with the question I am asked to answer: What are the present position, aims and expectations of Positivism?

Well! Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism, a professor at the *École Polytechnique*, died in Paris about forty-three years ago, having put forth his system of philosophy about sixty years ago, and having completed his system of Polity and Religion about forty-five years ago. There are now organized bodies of men, holding and teaching these ideas, in most of the parts of Europe and also of the Transatlantic continent. Speaking for England, for which only I am entitled to speak, the English groups, not very numerous bodies in London and in five or six principal towns, prefer to present the Positivist Synthesis in somewhat different aspects, but do not disagree in any essential principle. Some of these groups choose to insist on the strictly religious side of the Positivist scheme, regarding it as a Church in the ordinary sense of the term, and attempting to put into ceremonial practice the cult described in the fourth volume of Comte's "*Politique*." This neither Comte himself ever did, nor has his direct successor and principal disciple done so, nor have Comte's own personal friends in France. Without passing any opinion upon the ultimate realization of what, for my own part, I regard as a striking and interesting Utopia, neither I nor my colleagues in the English Positivist Committee have felt either

the time to be ripe for any such undertaking, nor the development of our movement to be adequate to make any attempt of the kind practical or serious. The attempt has led in South America to some farcical egotism, and the experiment elsewhere has led to no encouraging result. Personally, I have no wish to see the pontifical method carried any further, and it has little interest for me.

For my own part, from the formation by Comte's successor in Paris of the English Positivist Committee, of which I have been president for twenty years, I have always opposed everything that could tend to form "a sect." By "sect," I mean the Pharisaical separation of a body of persons from their fellow-citizens, valuing themselves on certain special observances, and living an exclusive life of their own. All this is to us so abhorrent that we would rather run the risk of becoming too easy than of becoming narrow sectaries. Accordingly, we have been, from the first, of the world and in the world around us; having no shibboleths, no creeds, no tests of orthodoxy, not even any roll of membership. We have always been ready to work with all humane movements of a kindred sort. We have no priests, no recognized form of worship, no ritual, and no special canon of adhesion. They who choose to come amongst us to follow our lectures, or to discuss our views, are welcome to come. Those who help on the work, by labor or by gifts in money or in kind, are of us and with us, so long as it pleases them to continue such co-operation.

Everything about our work is voluntary, gratuitous, open. Newton Hall is, first and foremost, a Free School; on its notices is written: "All meetings and lectures free." Nothing is paid to those who lecture, or demanded from those who attend. No questions are asked, no collection is made, no seats are paid for or reserved. Those who choose to subscribe can do so, without giving any pledge, and withdraw when they choose to withdraw. Lectures in science, in history, in languages, in art, even musical training and classical concerts, have all been free and public. And tens of thousands of men and women have been present from time to time, who would decline to call themselves Positivists, and who might at the time feel little more than sympathy and interest. The aim of our body has been to form a school of thought, not to found a sect; to influence current opinion, not to enroll members of a party; to uphold an ideal of religion which

should rest on positive science whilst permeating active life. It is an idle question to ask, "What are the numbers, or the machinery, of such a body?"

Newton Hall, opposite the Public Record Office, in London, has now been open nearly twenty years. It was so named because it stands on the ground purchased for the Royal Society by Sir Isaac Newton, its president, in 1710; and, during the eighteenth century, the Hall, built thereon by the Royal Society for its collections, contained the first nucleus of the British Museum. There public, free lectures on Positivist philosophy, science, morality and religion have been carried on continually during autumn, winter and spring, together with classes for the study of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, languages and music. The greater names in the Positivist Calendar of 558 Worthies of all ages and nations have been commemorated on special centenaries, those of musicians by appropriate musical pieces. In the summer months, these lectures have been extended in the form of pilgrimages to the birthplace, tomb, or residence of the illustrious dead, and lectures at the public museums, galleries and ancient monuments. In connection with Newton Hall, there have been social parties, libraries and Guilds of young men and young women. So far, the work of the Positivist body in London has been that of a Free School and People's Institute.

It may be asked, In what way does such a Free School differ from many other similar institutions? The answer is in the fact that the entire scheme of education given in Newton Hall is *synthetic* and *organic*—concentrated on the propaganda of the Positive Philosophy and the Religion of Humanity. Leaving it to other movements to promote miscellaneous information and promiscuous culture of a general kind, the aim of all Positivist teaching is to inculcate the cardinal doctrines of the Positive belief, the central principles of Positive morality, and the vital sense of the Human Religion. In the first Report issued from Newton Hall, for 1881, we said:

"The very existence of Positivism as a scientific system of belief depends on the institution of a complete course of education, and the formation of an adequate body of competent teachers. There is, on positive principles, no road to stable religious convictions except by the way of knowledge of real things; and there is no royal road to real knowledge other than the teaching of competent instructors and the systematic study of science in the widest sense. One of the pur-

poses for which Newton Hall has been opened is to offer free popular training in the essential elements of scientific knowledge. Our plan is but one of the many attempts around us to found a People's School. It differs from almost all of these in the following things:

"1. It will be on principle strictly free; no teacher being paid, and no fee being received.

"2. The education aimed at, not being either professional or literary, will follow the scheme of scientific instruction laid down for the future by *Auguste Comte*.

"3. Whilst having no theological or metaphysical element, the entire course of study will aim at a religious, that is, a social purpose, as enabling us to effect our due service to the cause of *Humanity*, by understanding the laws which regulate the world and our own material and moral being."

In pursuance of this scheme of education, courses of lectures have been given by graduates of the universities, most of them having been professors, examiners, and lecturers in various sciences, arts or history. The courses have been followed, in many cases, during the whole of that period, and many of the students have obtained a solid general education, especially in the various branches of history, biography and political philosophy. It is not pretended that this has been done by any large numbers. Other institutions of the kind have enjoyed much greater resources and have attracted far more numerous attendants. The reason is obvious. For one man who has the patience or the thoughtfulness to put himself under the curriculum of a laborious training, for the sole end of obtaining an intellectual and moral guidance in a definite system, there are always ninety-nine who are ready to pick up any desultory, entertaining or marketable knowledge which may be offered to them without too much mental discipline or any distinctive labels. To enter a Positivist Hall, much less to join a Positivist class, or to subscribe to a Positivist fund, requires in these days of prejudice and lampooning, a certain mental detachment and a real moral courage. The direct object of our courses is to inculcate Positive convictions with a view to a Positivist life. And as the public which is prepared to accept these terms is as yet not numerous, our hearers must be rather described as "fit, though few."

If the formation of coherent Positivist convictions by a scientific education be the first task of such a movement, it is far from being the sole task. The control of all action, whether political, economic, or international, by moral judgment is a cardinal duty imposed on Positivists in all places and at all times. Ac-

cordingly, for forty years English Positivists have ardently supported the just claims of Labor against the oppression of Capitalism, the just demand of the People to full incorporation in the State, which exists mainly for the use and improvement of the People; they have maintained the just demand of the Irish nation to be recognized as an indestructible national unit; they have protested against a series of unjust wars and the incessant efforts of British Imperialism to crush out one independent race after another. All this is no recent thing. Forty years ago, the founders of the Positivist group in England began to take public action on behalf of the organized Trades Unions. In 1867 the Positivist Society appealed to Parliament through Mr. John Bright, M. P., on behalf of the Irish Nationalists; and they have never ceased to uphold the same cause. In 1881 they appealed to the Government to recognize the full independence of the Transvaal Republic. And to-day they are the first to insist on the same policy as that of Justice and Honor.

There has never been an unjust annexation or a wanton war in Europe, Asia or Africa within the last thirty years, when the Positivist body has not raised its voice to plead for morality and justice, regardless of the popular cry for Empire and malignant sneers at "Little Englandism." The record of these efforts may be seen in the "Essays" of Dr. R. Congreve, the first to form a Positivist body in England; in the "Positivist Comments on Public Affairs, 1878-1892;" and, from 1893 to 1900, in the eight volumes of the *Positivist Review*. In an article on the "Positivist Comments" I wrote:

"The Positivist Society has no reason to shrink from a review of its policy over this period under five different administrations. It is a policy independent of party: national, patriotic, and devoid of any petty or factious criticism. Its sole aim is to plead for the real honor and good of England, in the interest of peace, the harmony of nations, respect for other races, religions, and honorable ambitions, and mainly for the cause of general civilization."

These "Comments," over fourteen years, I said:

"Embody a coherent and systematic policy dealing with England's international relations as a whole, and weighing the ultimate and indirect effect of each proposed action as affecting the peace of the world and the true cause of civilization. It is not a policy of peace-at-any-price, nor of a little-England, nor of uninstructed sentiment, nor of any prejudice of creed, or race, much less of party, of democratic faction, or mischief-making. It is a policy that considers the *past*,

and still more the *future*, and not merely the *present*—a policy that respects the rights and dignity of other nations as much as our own.”\*

Of course, such a policy as this, publicly pursued in times of intense social and political excitement, could not fail to strain the cohesion of the Positivist propaganda and to limit its progress. Bound by our most sacred principles to uphold definite views of national and international morality, we could not fail to encounter the prejudices of party, of class, of race, of patriotism, in their hours of keenest heat. Though resolutely abstaining from any party entanglement and from any criticism of practical applications of principle, it was in the last degree difficult to prevent some divergences of view, and impossible not to drive away thousands of those who were otherwise disposed to join. No system of thought, no economic scheme, certainly no religious movement, ever had to meet such inherent obstacles to acceptance. A philosophy appeals to thought, but it does not meddle with angry political debates. The social reformer has his own difficulties, but he does not rouse up the passions of politicians, party and journalism. The religious reformer renders unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s, and is absorbed in the higher interests of the Soul and its Salvation. But Positivism, because it is a Polity, as much as it is a Philosophy and a Religion, is continually forced to face the most angry storms of popular delirium and of political passion. And never so much as to-day.

Lastly, the distinctive aim of Positivism is to promulgate the conception of a real religion based on positive science. No religion can be stable or dominant, if it rests on hypotheses and aspirations, which are necessarily dreamy and in constant flux. If religion, in our age of realities, is to be based on acknowledged proofs, its object must be earthly and human. The Supreme Power, dominant on earth and over man, of which we have scientific knowledge is Humanity. And the ideal of Positivism is gradually to form the sense of a religion of Humanity.

And this is, also, the main difficulty that Positivism has to overcome. Denouncing, as it does, the insolent folly of Atheism, and also the arid nullity of Agnosticism, it is yet difficult to convince the religious minded that Positivism can be anything but a new attack on Christianity and on Theism. Comte said: “The atheist is the most irrational of all theologians, for he gives the

\* *Positive Review*, Vol. IV., 73.

least admissible answer to the insoluble problem of the Universe." Neither in open controversy, nor in private meditation, does the true Positivist hold the belief that the Infinite All came about by chance or made itself. But the orthodox controversialist perversely confounds him with those who do hold the atheistic creed, and this becomes the source of rooted antipathy and prejudice. The Positivist neither denies Creation with the atheist, nor is he satisfied, with the agnostic, to boast that he knows nothing as to the religious problem. He simply says that, whatever higher paths may yet be known, the historic conception of Humanity and its practical providence offers all the essential elements of a religious faith.

This does not satisfy the Theist, and the forms of Theism are infinitely vague, indefinite, mystical, or even verbal, almost as numerous as the individual theists. A well-known man of letters thus summed up his creed: "He fancied there was a sort of a something!" Any of us might say that, and not find it a working religion. It is the very definiteness, the undeniable reality of Humanity, its close touch upon every phase of human life, that repels so many anxious wanderers in the limitless wilderness of Theology. In these days of shallow spiritualism, the weaker brethren will cling to anything that is cloudy, unintelligible, transcendental. And their practical Gods are Mammon and Moloch.

Much less is Positivism an attack on Christianity. It is the rational development of Christianity, its incorporation with science and philosophy. Not, certainly, with the miraculous and supernatural dogmas of Christendom, but with the humanity of the Gospel in its spiritual ideal, and the moral and social ideals of the Christian churches. No doubt, the Christian ideal is but a fractional part of the Positivist ideal, just as the Christian ideal is only in touch with a fractional part of human nature and man's life on earth. But so far as this Christian ideal is honestly human, and essentially permanent, Positivism is destined to give it a vast development. But this is not enough for those who still hanker after the Athanasian Creed or the Westminster Confession, or even some more inscrutable label.

The human type of religion must radically differ from the theological type, for it can have nothing of the violent, ecstatic, sensational character which is inherent in Monotheism. Positiv-

ism is an adult and mature phase of religion, primarily addressed to adults, to men and women of formed character and trained understanding. It is a manly and womanly religion, full of manly and womanly associations and duties. Hence, it must grow gradually, work equally, and be marked by endurance, reserve, good sense, completeness, more than by passion, fanaticism and ecstatic self-abandonment. When they ask us: Where are the tremendous sanctions, spasmodic beatitudes, penances, raptures, beatific visions and transcendent mysteries of Christianity? we can only smile. These things belong to the childhood of man, the fairy tale of religion. The "customs" of Dahomey, the sacrifices of Polytheism and Mosaism disgust the maturity of man. And so Christianity will never satisfy the later ages of civilization, until it is rational from top to bottom, co-extensive with human life, and in close touch with our latest culture and all forms of healthy manliness and womanliness. Religion is not to be forever nourished by mere hysterical emotions, and vague yearnings for what we cannot rationally conceive.

Religion, so reconstituted, will lose much of its rapturous and ecstatic character. It will gain in solidity, constancy and breadth. Instead of being a thing of transcendental hopes and fears, stimulated on Sundays and occasional moments, but laid aside, if not doubted, for the rest of man's active time, religion will be a body of scientific convictions, poetic emotions, and moral habits, in close relation with all our thoughts, acts and feelings, and naturally applying to everything we do, or desire, or think. It will be part of the citizen's daily life: more social than personal, more civic than domestic, more practical than mystical. It will give ample scope to the personal, the domestic, even the mystical side of human nature, within the control of reason and the claims of active duty. Religion will thus mean the guidance of right living by the light of personal and social duty as taught by a systematic Sociology. Its creed will be a synthetic Philosophy, resting on the general body of positive science. And its worship will be the expression of loyalty to Humanity in all its phases, as manifested in its true servants, the known or the unknown, the living or the dead, of all ages and of every race.

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